

Using Service-Learning and the DEAL Model to Develop Students' Soft Skills Upon Career Entry

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Abstract

Professionals in the academic practice fields of education and social work indicate students lack positive soft skills upon entry into the workforce. Although the call for attention to soft skills is not new, the changing generational context prompts a reexamination of these needed skills in today's society and the workplace. Preparing first-time-in-college students beyond content knowledge can appear difficult, particularly teaching in a traditional classroom environment. In this reflection, we share the strategy of using the DEAL Model for Critical Reflection in service-learning to highlight areas for growth and positively develop these essential workplace skills, so that students are more holistically equipped for a career, to be active citizens of their communities, and to contribute to their families.

Keywords

service-learning; soft skills; interpersonal skills; workforce development; transferrable skills; higher education; college students; generation

Introduction

Faculty members of professional practice disciplines (social work and education) have always assumed the responsibility of preparing students for entry into their practice fields upon graduation. However, feedback from practitioners within the field, who supervise our students, revolves around students not exhibiting appropriate soft skills in the professional work

environment. Content knowledge is not the struggle; rather, basic employee behaviors (soft skills) have risen to a heightened concern for proactive remediation.

Due to these concerns, a concerted effort to enhance students' soft skills becomes imperative at an earlier stage in college program progression, prior to entry into capstone or field internship experiences. In order to successfully maintain our community partnerships and prepare our students effectively to be competitive in the future job market, solutions become imperative. Although the call for attention to soft skills is not new, the changing generational context prompts a reexamination of these needed skills in today's society and the workplace. Thus, this article aims to 1) explore the literature on the need for the development of soft skills, 2) explain the generational context of students entering higher education, and 3) share strategies of using the DEAL Model for Critical Reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2004, 2009) in service-learning as a pedagogy to positively support the growth and development of students' soft skills.

Soft Skills

Soft skills are often called transferable skills (Stack & Fede, 2017) or interpersonal skills (Weber et al., 2009), and often align with one's Emotional Intelligence or EQ (Sethi, 2016). Soft skills detail qualities of how people interact with others, organize and process information, solve problems, and manage work. Regardless of the profession college graduates will pursue, soft skills are vital to their success and to organizations where they become employed. For this reason, soft skills are indispensable. Graduates who possess these skills provide innovative and creative aspects to the organization and increase the organization's social and economic outcomes (OECD, 2013; Reich, 2007).

Dozens of soft skills are needed for success in the 21st-century workplace. Soft skills include communication, teamwork, decision making, organization, critical thinking, obtaining and processing information, personal habits, leadership, emotional empathy, flexibility/adaptability, entrepreneurship, and responsibility, just to name a few (Campbell et al., 2001; Devedzic et al., 2018; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013; Sethi, 2016; Stack & Fede, 2017). Ultimately, employers are expecting graduates to be employable with both hard and soft skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Calway & Murphy, 2007; Fischer, 2013; Hora, 2017; Stack & Fede, 2017).

Many college graduates lack the necessary soft skills to be effective at their jobs post-graduation (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013; Wilkie, 2019). A lack of effective soft skills also tarnishes an employer's impressions of a candidate during the recruitment and selection process (Pauw et al., 2006). Revealed in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Class of 2019 survey, graduating students overstressed their competence in skills necessary to be successful in the workplace. Professionals in the workplace observed gaps of skills in vital areas, where students do not believe gaps exist. The top area revealed on the survey was regarding students' professionalism and work ethic; 95% of students identified proficiency in this area, yet less than half of employers concurred (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019).

The job markets of today are ever-changing and could be non-existent tomorrow. Transferrable skills are fundamental across disciplines/professions; in any market, professionals with these skills will be able to be successful. Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation,

and Stanford Research Center have determined “that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft and people skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills)” (National Soft Skills Association, 2017, p. 3). These statistics were extrapolated from a study authored by Charles Riborg Mann that was published by the Carnegie Foundation in 1918, titled “A Study from Engineering Education” (National Soft Skills Association, 2017). While this study was conducted over a century ago, soft skills are still of primary relevance today in the workplace. LinkedIn’s Global Talent Trends 2019 Report, surveying an estimated 5,000 professionals in 35 countries, revealed 92% of companies responded that soft skills matter as much or more than hard skills and 80% noted that they are increasingly important to company success (Lobosco, 2019). Aimed at teaching academic and technical skills, educational entities have not focused on soft skill elements for personal, educational, and workplace success and should devote more time to the development of soft skills to ensure that college graduates are marketable and employable (National Soft Skills Association, 2017).

Generation Z

Traditional-age students, who now comprise the majority of first-time-in-college students, constitute the youngest generational cohort, known by a number of suggested names including the Homeland Generation, Post-Millennials, Generation We, IGen, or Generation Z (Beck & Wright, 2019). Research on this newest generational cohort is still evolving. Generation Z has an even higher level of absorption with technology (Miller & Mills, 2019). As a result, social and relationship skills are weaker, placing members at a heightened risk of loneliness, isolation, and mental health issues (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018). Generation Z students are typically connected with friendships through a digital or social media platform, making it much more challenging for them to socially engage and connect in face-to-face environments (Beck & Wright, 2019). Privacy boundaries have also been skewed, making the lines blurry when it comes to what should be considered public versus private information with the frequent use of social media. Increased exposure to diversity has helped this generation with an increased social awareness, which is positive; however, it proves to be a challenge as well when faced with others’ differing opinions. The unique attributes of this generational cohort have further heightened the need to address soft skills in pre-professional education.

Using Service-Learning to Develop Soft Skills

Through extensive support in the literature and from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the use of high-impact practices (HIPs) has been promoted in higher education to ultimately have an impact on both educational outcomes but also personal development (Kinzie, 2012). When faculty use these practices effectively, students are required to face and unravel complex, real-world issues, which are necessary skills to engage as members of their communities (Kuh, 2008). One of these many practices is the pedagogy of service-learning, which this article emphasizes. Service-learning is underpinned by the idea of connecting students with direct, real-world experiences that students are learning about in their curriculum of study (Kuh, 2008). Based on the literature, through the use of this pedagogy, two primary purposes can be attained: 1) students have the opportunity to apply learning to real community issues and reflect on these service experiences in the classroom setting, and 2) students provide deliberate service to address a community problem that is of benefit to the community itself (Bringle et al., 2004; Kuh, 2008). We have added a third valuable purpose of implementing the service-learning pedagogy,

teaching and developing soft skills that are necessary for college graduates in citizenship, career, and life.

To be prepared for success in the real world, students require skills and values that are broader than their field of study (Farrell, 2019). As noted previously, gaps in soft skills still exist among college graduates entering their careers. One study among field supervisors of social work interns revealed the most challenging characteristics in working with students were 1) little openness to feedback, direction, or supervision, 2) poor personal and professional boundaries, 3) incongruence with social work values, and 4) disengagement from the practicum and the social work profession (Street, 2019). Similarly, Mantulak et al. (2020) described the current generation of student interns as having a lack of confidence in the clinical setting, a perceived lack of initiative and work ethic, and an inability to accept and incorporate feedback provided in supervision.

These deficits in soft skills can be difficult to identify and assess as an instructor in an artificial classroom environment. Using HIPs, such as service-learning, to meet the course's learning outcomes provides a pathway to identifying students' soft skills or lack thereof prior to entering their career. HIPs provide instructors a more holistic view of students within their field in a broader organizational system that is a simulation of the career environment. Field supervisors recommend exposing students to real-life situations as a preventative strategy before students enter the internship setting (Street, 2019).

Within identified courses, a variety of faculty representing multiple disciplines integrated service-learning projects into their courses. Using service-learning revealed opportunities to support the growth and development of students' soft skills in addition to the traditional student learning outcomes. In these projects with community partners, students struggled with reconciling professional behaviors, appropriate communication, etiquette/netiquette, understanding organizational hierarchy, and working with diverse individuals with diverse perspectives. These opportunities gave the participating faculty the chance to have meaningful, vulnerable conversations with students to provide hands-on supervision to help address these issues and improve their soft skills prior to graduation, providing a vantage point that is not possible in a traditional classroom environment. A student may be highly successful in their academic performance in the classroom and yet struggle with interaction and the application of social skills when placed in these real-world contexts. Without knowing about these deficits, the student graduates with a heightened perception of their capabilities and a lack of awareness of the need for growth. This revelation forces the student to face the harsh reality of potential challenges securing employment. Faculty have a due diligence to students and professional community partnerships to prepare students effectively to avoid these deficits. Embedding a variety of service-learning opportunities within programs at an earlier stage gives students multiple experiences with which to practice and develop the use of these skills. Increasing the frequency of service-learning involvement builds mastery of soft skills but also elevates student confidence in applying these skills.

Using Critical Reflection

Reflection has been a valuable, yet challenging, tool in enriching learning for over a century. When reflecting upon service-learning experiences, students need help connecting experiences to course content, comparing theory to practice, challenging beliefs and assumptions, identifying elements of power and privilege, examining the impact of decisions and actions, finding alternative and

sustainable solutions, articulating what was learned, and setting goals for future learning experiences. The DEAL Model for Critical Reflection was developed by Ash & Clayton (2004, 2009) to address these challenges by providing a framework to guide such reflections. As faculty, we have found success using this model to reveal opportunities for student/faculty conversations regarding their service-learning experiences.

The DEAL Model for Critical Reflection consists of three phases (Describe, Examine, and Articulate Learning) each of which includes prompts to guide students through the critical thinking processes of examining and developing their own learning. In the first step (Describe), students are asked to provide a detailed description of the experience. Reflection prompts in this phase include questions such as when and where the experience took place, who was/was not present, who did/did not participate, what was/was not said or done, and what else did/did not happen that may be of importance.

In the second step (Examine), students are guided beyond summarizing the experience into analyses related to the desired outcomes within relevant categories of learning. With service-learning experiences, these categories are academic mastery, personal growth, and civic engagement (Ash & Clayton, 2004). Within academic mastery, prompts for examining the experience are based on course content and the application of theory to practice. For example, service-learning experiences with individuals with disabilities were embedded into an undergraduate Introduction to Adapted Physical Activity course required for students preparing for careers in kinesiology (e.g., physical educators, coaches, personal trainers, physical or occupational therapists, and athletic trainers). Course content included laws in special education, select disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy), assessment and programming, accommodations and modifications (e.g., instructional strategies, communication systems, assistive devices), community programs (e.g., Special Olympics), the impact of the media, and adapted sport (e.g., Paralympics). Students in this course were provided an array of service-learning opportunities with individuals with intellectual, social, and physical disabilities in physical activity settings. These experiences included shadowing physical and occupational therapists, volunteering at a university-sponsored equine assisted therapeutic riding program, coaching inclusive cheerleading practices, officiating or playing in integrated intramural basketball games, assisting with a local Special Olympics athletics (track and field) meet, and implementing Rock the Gym (a carnival/field day event specifically designed for school-age children with disabilities). In this example, academic mastery prompts could include questions such as: What academic material from class was relevant to this experience?; How did this experience compare/contrast with what you learned in class?; or How did this experience enhance your knowledge of a specific topic, reading, theory, or concept? Academic mastery prompts could include questions such as: What academic material from class was relevant to this experience?; How did this experience compare/contrast with what you learned in class?; or How did this experience enhance your knowledge of a specific topic, reading, theory, or concept?

When examining personal growth, students are prompted to consider their own perspectives, assumptions, characteristics, and skills. Reflecting upon the service-learning experiences described above, one student expressed a newfound awareness of her personal behaviors, interactions, and communication:

The experience of going through this class and completing the service learning experience has been not only academically educational, but also eye-opening in my everyday life. I

now consider how I treat all disabled individuals as well as the comments I make around everyone I come into contact with. Rock the Gym gave me hands-on experience with children with all different kinds of disabilities, which has prepared me to interact with individuals with disabilities in my day-to-day life.

Another student described lessons learned from initial interactions with this population:

This was my first time [working] with any type of disability which was very difficult at first. At first I started off giving in to a lot of the things the child wanted to do because I was trying to be nice. Very quickly did I learn that he actually understood a lot more than I anticipated and used it to his advantage. One thing that I could definitely use when working with kids with intellectual disabilities is to treat them as normal as possible and be firm/clear when giving directions.

Discussions following these reflections could involve the importance of demonstrating respect with regard to individuals with disabilities, as well as other marginalized populations, and adapting your expectations and communication to an individual's unique strengths and weaknesses, thereby providing opportunities to evaluate and improve soft skills such as personal habits, adaptability, and communication.

Prompts from the civic engagement perspective include identifying elements of power and privilege, examining the impact of decisions and actions in relation to the common good, considering alternative approaches, and analyzing options for facilitating sustainable changes in the world around them. After participating with Special Olympics, one student expressed concerns regarding the potential consequences of plans to defund the program:

My service learning experience developed my global awareness of political and social issues individuals with disabilities are met with. Currently, the U.S government has proposed to defund Special Olympics. From what I have learned about effects of physical activity and how it enriches the lives of individuals with disabilities, the defunding of this program would have devastating effects on the disabled community. Special Olympics not only improves the overall health of their athletes, they raise awareness and change how society views the capabilities of those with disabilities.

Another student addressed the need for well-trained professionals and advocacy efforts:

The service learning experience I had in this class helped me recognize the increasing need for knowledgeable and well-trained clinicians to advocate for individuals with disabilities. These experiences helped build my confidence in my abilities to recognize the challenges and possible solutions for people within the disabled community. As a prospective occupational therapy student, I plan to raise awareness to political and social issues within the disabled community and advocate for the human rights for those with disabilities.

Comments such as these open the floor for further discussions regarding the importance of continuing professional development and engagement, examining the impact of decisions and actions, brainstorming alternative and sustainable solutions, and advocating for societal change. These reflections, and subsequent conversations, provide opportunities to evaluate and improve skills in obtaining and processing information, decision making, and critical thinking.

The third and final step of the DEAL Model (Articulated Learning) consists of four guiding questions: What did I learn?; How did I learn it?; Why does it matter?; and What will I do in light of it? In this phase, students use information generated from the first two steps (Describe and Examine) to articulate what was learned from the overall experience, provide context to how that learning occurred, consider how the learning has value, both in the specific situation and as applied to others, and set goals to improve themselves, their learning, and future experiences. In the examples below, students were also asked to analyze the interconnectedness of knowledge and skills developed beyond and within the discipline (core and discipline-specific courses) and extracurricular experiences toward their holistic development. One student shared:

This experience has made it clear that the above three areas [core curriculum, discipline-specific curriculum, and extracurricular experiences] combine to form me into the future clinician (occupational therapist) I strive to be. The process started with my “core curriculum”, or the classes that were not major-specific but still essential to my overall learning. These classes are the foundation that the rest of my learning was constructed on, and they are the fundamental principles for the field I will be in. However, because I had this rudimentary knowledge, I was able to learn on a deeper level, in my discipline-specific courses. Additionally, this advanced knowledge was then applied in my extracurricular activities [field experiences], and I had an improved understanding of different topics within those situations. However, the opposite is also true, I gained many supplementary skills from these [service learning] settings that transferred over to my classroom settings, and these skills aided me in my overall learning. All of these areas combined have increased my knowledge to a more advanced level of thinking that will, eventually, be applied in a real-world, clinical setting when I will be wholly responsible for my own patients or students.

Another student explained:

Each experience has taught me certain skills that I did not realize [would have] such a power in changing not only my life but, other people’s lives as well. Taking [this class] has opened up my perspective of how much of an impact being physically active can mean to person who may have a disability. I’ve also come to see that by knowing how to write research papers, communicating with others, and educating myself on knowing/making laws allows me to be a voice in the matter. I can bring awareness and more opportunities to a community of people who have been suppressed or bullied by society for something they have no control over. These courses all interconnect with each other by allowing someone like me to take certain things that I have learned and do well by others.

While the examples above pertain to experiences with individuals with disabilities in the field of education, prompts utilized throughout the DEAL Model—particularly regarding personal growth, civic engagement, and articulating learning—can be tailored to guide students through analyzing selected soft skills for any discipline (e.g., communication, adaptability, responsibility, decision making, critical thinking, leadership). This reflective process alerts faculty to any incongruence between a student’s own awareness and their observed behaviors, to serve as a starting point to initiate meaningful conversations about these differences and set goals for improvement.

Conclusion

From these faculty experiences, using service-learning and the DEAL Model for Critical Reflection to guide the examination of those experiences has helped develop students more holistically. Students see their course content come to life, overcome challenges, refer to a personal sense of community and civic responsibility, and share the “aha” moments that shape their future personal growth and lifelong learning. In addition, employing the service-learning pedagogy aligns with the changing generational context of first-time students in higher education, as Generation Z prefers to learn through real life, hands-on experiences but is in need of stronger social skills (Gardner et al., 2018). High-impact practices such as service-learning have the opportunity to move the needle forward in higher education by intentionally preparing college students holistically for their futures as a citizen of their community, a professional in their career, and a member of their family, while strategically responding to the expectations of the workforce.

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